

**TESTIMONY of
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES— SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL
LANDS**

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**Concerning
Examining the Challenges Facing Forest Management, Wildfire Suppression, and
Wildland Firefighters Ahead of the 2023 Wildfire Year**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss wildfire management and the 2023 Fire Year. Wildfires threaten urban and rural communities, Tribal Nations and their interests, farm and ranchland, municipal water supplies, timber, recreation sites, and important wildlife habitat.

The Forest Service has a continuing need and responsibility to partner with all communities to prepare for wildfires. The Forest Service does not work alone in managing wildfires across the nation – wildfire requires an all-of-government response, including major contributions from our Federal Partners, the Departments of the Interior and Defense, and the States, Tribes, and local governments, contractors, and volunteer organizations. These partnerships have evolved over many years, creating a robust interagency capability to support wildfire suppression across the country.

Over the past 20 years, wildfires have become larger, last longer, exhibit more extreme fire behavior, and are more challenging to contain than ever before as a result of accumulating fuels, a warming climate, and expanding development in the wildland-urban interface. Wildfire risk has reached crisis proportions. This increased frequency of fire in the wildland-urban interface continues to severely impact lives, communities, infrastructure, and cultural and natural resources. Although drought conditions continue for nearly half the country, it is too early to predict with any certainty the fire activity for the 2023 fire year. Long-term relationships with our federal, state, Tribal, and local governments and our contracted partners ensure we have a strong workforce and the necessary resources to provide a safe and effective wildfire response.

I want to personally thank our partners who answer our call for assistance to bolster our capabilities. States also provide significant assistance with their National Guard units. We are grateful for all of our partners around the country and around the world who continue to pitch in to help our nation through each difficult fire year.

2023 Fire Year

There is always the potential for significant wildfire events and growth throughout the nation depending on local conditions. The National Interagency Fire Center's Predictive Services

provides an updated four-month National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook on the first day of each month. The current May – August 2023 outlook indicates drought will continue on much of the southern and central High Plains. However, drought improvement is likely across the rest of the Plains, in the Mid-Atlantic, and on the Florida Peninsula. Above normal fire potential is forecasted across portions of the Upper Midwest and western Great Lakes in June, with above normal potential across portions of northern Nevada, southwest Idaho, eastern Oregon, and central Washington for July and August. Below normal fire potential is forecasted along the southern California coast and much of northern New Mexico and Arizona into the southern Great Basin. In June, below normal potential is expected to expand into most mountains in California, the Wasatch Mountains of Utah, and the New Mexico central mountain chain, but a small area of east-central Nevada and west-central Utah will return to normal. For July, below normal potential will continue in the Sierra and northwest California mountains, but normal potential will return to the rest of California, Southwest, and southern Great Basin. Below normal significant fire potential will continue across the southern Sierra into August.

Taking Care of Firefighters

Wildland firefighters are the backbone of our ability to protect communities and vital infrastructure from wildfires. As the size and severity of fires has grown, so too has our need for fire personnel.

In 2022, we set a goal of hiring 11,300 firefighters and we were able to reach 97% of our target. As we approach the busiest part of the 2023 fire year, the Forest Service again aspires to hire 11,300 wildland firefighters nationwide. We do not yet have final numbers at this time, but the Agency is updating hiring numbers bi-weekly and by region on our [public facing website](#). The Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 President's budget requested funding for an additional 970 wildland firefighters. With the President's budget proposals, we are confident in our ability to increase Wildland Fire System capacity for a total of 12,270 operational firefighters in 2024. In addition, for the 2023 fire year, the Forest Service will have up to 24 next generation airtankers, more than 200 helicopters, and more than 900 engines available to manage wildfires.

Wildland fire forecasts are consistently predicting fire seasons that start sooner, end later, and are more severe throughout the nation. With this change in condition, it is imperative to ensure a robust year-round workforce available to respond at any time and also be available to undertake preventive actions like hazardous fuels management treatments during periods of low fire activity. These men and women need to be supported and equitably compensated, equipped with the latest technologies, and have a better work-life balance. As the complexity of the firefighting environment grows exponentially, our recruitment and retention of firefighters has been further complicated by our inability to offer a competitive wage for permanent and seasonal employees. Federal wages for firefighters have not kept pace with wages offered by state, local and private entities in some areas of the United States. Firefighters must be fairly paid for the grueling work they are willing to take on.

The workforce reforms proposed in the President's FY 2024 budget request and supporting legislation will increase federal and tribal firefighters' pay, invest more in their mental and

physical health and wellbeing, improve their housing options, and expand the number of permanent firefighters. These reforms build on the temporary pay increase provided by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). Thanks to BIL, more than 12,000 firefighters received a temporary pay increase of \$20,000 or 50% of base pay (whichever is less). Notably, the funding for that pay supplement will be nearly exhausted by the end of September 2023, unless Congress intervenes to avert a pay cliff. In the FY 2024 budget, we are proposing a permanent base pay increase for all firefighters. Unlike the temporary increase in BIL a permanent base pay increase is an investment in our firefighters' future, as an increase in basic pay leads to an increase in retirement benefits. Additionally, a permanent base pay increase offers a host of benefits to the U.S. Government, such as reduced turnover and lower hiring and training costs. The proposal includes a request for \$180 million in support of a special base rate salary table and incident standby pay for all responders that are mobilized to a fire assignment. We will also need Congress to pass special legislation that authorizes the new pay table.

The FY 2024 budget proposal also increases the size of the workforce at USDA and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), supports additional mental and physical health services, and increases funding to house firefighters and support personnel. We recognize that addressing the housing crisis must happen now as it impacts our ability to recruit and retain our workforce. To this end, the budget proposes a \$50 million investment in housing. The USDA has convened a national working group that has identified key recommendations and is exploring innovative solutions for providing safe, affordable and sustainable housing for employees. The proposed budget also calls for an increase of \$10 million each for USDA and DOI to establish a Joint Wildland Firefighter Behavioral Health Program.

We must take better care of the people serving on the frontlines to confront our nation's wildfire crisis. Together, these efforts would help address long-standing recruitment and retention challenges. These investments, totaling \$569 million, would build on the historic reforms in the BIL and ensure the Forest Service receives the support it needs to continue meeting evolving mission demands, as both the frequency and intensity of catastrophic wildfires are expected to continue to increase.

It is time for a significant change in our federal wildland fire system that invests in the women and men that we rely on to protect communities, critical infrastructure, and our natural resources. We look forward to working with Congress to support, retain, and modernize the federal wildland fire fighter workforce. For Congressional consideration, the USDA, DOI, and the Office of Personnel Management developed a comprehensive legislative proposal that would provide solutions to these challenges. We remain committed to working with congressional leaders on this crucial proposal.

The Risks to Forests

Long-term, we must address work on the ground to ultimately address the wildfire crisis. Nearly a quarter of the contiguous U.S. is currently in a high to moderate wildfire condition. Over the last two decades, we have witnessed what has become a now familiar pattern: bigger and more

destructive wildfires that are extremely challenging and costly to suppress. We have experienced catastrophic fire seasons devastating communities and destroying resources in their wake. They threaten human health, water quality, homes, jobs, local economies, communities, and infrastructure. They also threaten key ecological services, including carbon storage, species habitat, soil stability and watershed function: in some cases, even resulting in long-term deforestation.

Vast areas of the West and across the country are at risk from huge wildfires that can quickly spread 10 to 30 miles or more, burning through multiple landownerships, forest types, and communities. Conditions are only expected to worsen as our climate continues to change, and development in the wildland urban interface continues unabated.

This growing wildfire crisis created the need for a new land management strategy—one designed to support strategic management and restoration of millions of acres of land in high-risk areas to protect forest health, watershed function, and human infrastructure. The need for increased pace and scale of restoration necessitates a holistic response in partnership with multiple agencies, State and Tribal governments, communities, industries, organizations, and private landowners.

This collaborative response needs to be a paradigm shift from small-scale, independently managed treatments to strategic, science-based landscape scale treatments that cross boundaries and meet the scale of the problem, starting initially with those places critically at risk.

The Wildfire Crisis Strategy

The Forest Service is entering our second year of carrying out our 10-year strategy for confronting the wildfire crisis in the West. Our Wildfire Crisis Strategy aims to increase science-based fuels treatments by up to four times the previous treatment levels, especially in those areas most at risk. Fuels treatments by the Forest Service, together with partners, have made a difference over the years. However, the scale of treatments is outmatched by the rapid increase in the scale and severity of wildfires as climate change accelerates. This strategy calls for treating up to 20 million additional acres of National Forest System lands over the coming decade, and working with partners, including colleagues at Interior, to treat up to 30 million additional acres on adjoining lands of multiple ownerships, while building a long-term maintenance plan. The intent for these treatments is to reduce the wildfire risk to communities, critical infrastructure, municipal water sources, and natural resources, and to restore and maintain fire-adapted landscapes so they are more resilient.

Within BIL, Congress provided a \$1.6 billion down payment that greatly assists in putting our Wildfire Crisis Strategy into action with investments on ten landscapes in eight Western States (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington). Through work on these landscapes and others, we completed treatments on 3.2 million acres nationally in 2022. We also accomplished these treatments, both mechanical treatments and prescribed fire, in 118 of the 250 high-priority priority fireheds identified in the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. This work was accomplished despite numerous barriers including internal staffing capacity, lack of markets for small-diameter wood, and high post-fire workloads from previous

seasons. The work on these acres directly reduced risk to communities, infrastructure, and critical watersheds.

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding provides the Forest Service an additional \$1.8 billion for hazardous fuels funding in the wildland-urban interface. With IRA funding, we recently selected 11 additional landscapes for treatment in seven Western States (Arizona, California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington). Combined with the initial investment landscapes in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington,, our actions will span 134 of the 250 high-risk fire sheds in the western U.S., with the investment we announced in January 2023 of \$930 million on 21 landscapes. These investments will help reduce the risk of wildfire to at-risk communities, Tribal lands, critical infrastructure, utility corridors, and public water sources. We listened to our partners, the public we serve, Tribes and many others regarding what mattered most to them, where opportunity is, and where challenges remain. Their feedback and our experience on these landscapes helped us identify both challenges to implementation and enabling conditions for future success. This work will mitigate risks to approximately 200 communities within these landscapes.

The Wildfire Crisis Strategy builds on current work and leverages congressional authorities such as those from the 2018 Farm Bill, including the Insect and Disease Categorical Exclusion, Good Neighbor Authority, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, Tribal Forestry Protection Act, and Cross Boundary Hazardous Fuels; congressional authorities from BIL, including, Community Wildfire Defense Grants, the fuel break categorical exclusion and emergency actions to protect public health and safety, critical infrastructure and natural resources on National Forest System lands; along with other programs and authorities such as stewardship contracting and the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Program, all which have proven invaluable in our work. The Wildfire Crisis Strategy strengthens partnerships to support our work to mitigate wildfire risk and restore forest health and resiliency over the next decade.

The Forest Service is very grateful to Congress for providing the resources through BIL and the IRA to seed our initial work and put the Wildfire Crisis Strategy in motion. It is important to note that fully executing the strategy to treat 50 million acres across jurisdictions will take continued federal investment, coupled with funding and capacity delivered from States and all of our partners in this work.

The FY 2024 President's budget provides \$323 million to complement \$1.6 billion provided in the BIL and \$1.8 billion provided in the IRA to support ongoing implementation of the 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy. These resources would increase the scale of hazardous fuel reduction and restoration treatments within high-risk fireheds as part of the Administration's comprehensive, nationwide response to the threat of catastrophic wildfire to natural resources, communities, and infrastructure.

Conclusion

The USDA Forest Service is committed to keeping our communities and firefighters safe as fire seasons grow longer and more severe. The dedication, bravery, and professional integrity of our firefighters and support personnel is second to none. As we work with our many partners to

assist communities impacted by wildfires, we are committed, through shared stewardship, to change this trend in the coming years.

We greatly appreciate the significant resources Congress has provided through the BIL and the IRA that will allow the Forest Service, with our many partners, to take the initial steps to address the wildfire crisis. This work will result in resilient landscapes that have ecologic integrity, provide essential ecosystem services including carbon storage and habitat for wildlife, and boundless opportunities for American citizens to recreate.

The Forest Service looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to continue providing world class suppression response and reducing the severity of wildfires in our country.